

CATECHESIS ON
THE FAMILY
2015 (VOL. II)



POPE FRANCIS

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VOL. II

Pope Francis
2015

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MAN AND WOMAN

General Audience

April 15, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today's catechesis is dedicated to an aspect central to the theme of the family: the great gift that God gave to humanity with the creation of man and woman and with the sacrament of marriage. This catechesis and the next one will treat the difference and complementarity between man and woman, who stand at the summit of divine creation; then the two after that will be on other topics concerning marriage.

Let us begin with a brief comment on the first narrative of creation, in the Book of Genesis. Here we read that God, after having created the universe and all living beings, created his masterpiece, the human being, whom He made in his own image: "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gn 1:27), so says the Book of Genesis.

And as we all know, sexual difference is present in so many forms of life, on the great scale of living beings. But man and woman alone are made in the image and likeness of God: the biblical text repeats it three times in two passages (26-27): man and woman are the image and likeness of God. This tells us that it is not man alone who is the image of God or woman alone who is the image of God, but man and woman as a couple who are the image of God. The difference between man and woman is not meant to stand in opposition, or to subordinate, but is for the sake of communion and generation, always in the image and likeness of God.

Experience teaches us: in order to know oneself well and develop harmoniously, a human being needs the reciprocity of man and woman. When that is lacking, one can see the consequences. We are made to listen to one another and help one another. We can say that without the mutual enrichment of this relationship — in thought and in action, in affection and in work, as well as in faith — the two cannot even understand the depth of what it means to be man and woman.

Modern contemporary culture has opened new spaces, new forms of freedom and new depths in order to enrich the understanding of this

difference. But it has also introduced many doubts and much skepticism. For example, I ask myself, if the so-called gender theory is not, at the same time, an expression of frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it. Yes, we risk taking a step backwards. The removal of difference in fact creates a problem, not a solution. In order to resolve the problems in their relationships, men and women need to speak to one another more, listen to each other more, get to know one another better, love one another more. They must treat each other with respect and cooperate in friendship. On this human basis, sustained by the grace of God, it is possible to plan a lifelong marital and familial union. The marital and familial bond is a serious matter, and it is so for everyone not just for believers. I would urge intellectuals not to leave this theme aside, as if it had to become secondary in order to foster a more free and just society.

God entrusted the earth to the alliance between man and woman: its failure deprives the earth of warmth and darkens the sky of hope. The signs are already worrisome, and we see them. I would like to indicate, among many others, two points that I believe call for urgent attention.

The first. There is no doubt that we must do far more to advance women, if we want to give more strength to the reciprocity between man and woman. In fact, it is necessary that woman not only be listened to more, but that her voice carry real weight, a recognized authority in society and in the Church. The very way Jesus considered women in a context less favourable than ours, because women in those times were relegated to second place. Jesus considered her in a way which gives off a powerful light, which enlightens a path that leads afar, of which we have only covered a small stretch. We have not yet understood in depth what the feminine genius can give us, what woman can give to society and also to us. Maybe women see things in a way that complements the thoughts of men. It is a path to follow with greater creativity and courage.

A second reflection concerns the topic of man and woman created in the image of God. I wonder if the crisis of collective trust in God, which does us so much harm, and makes us pale with resignation, incredulity and cynicism, is not also connected to the crisis of the alliance between man and woman. In fact the biblical account, with the great symbolic fresco depicting the earthly paradise and original sin, tells us in fact that the communion with God is reflected in the communion of the human couple

and the loss of trust in the heavenly Father generates division and conflict between man and woman.

The great responsibility of the Church, of all believers, and first of all of believing families, which derives from us, impels people to rediscover the beauty of the creative design that also inscribes the image of God in the alliance between man and woman. The earth is filled with harmony and trust when the alliance between man and woman is lived properly. And if man and woman seek it together, between themselves, and with God, without a doubt they will find it. Jesus encourages us explicitly to bear witness to this beauty, which is the image of God.

General Audience
April 22, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the preceding catechesis on the family, I meditated on the first narrative of the creation of the human being, in the first chapter of Genesis, where it is written: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (1:27).

Today, I would like to complete the reflection with the second narrative, which we find in the second chapter. Here we read that the Lord, after having created heaven and earth, “formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (2:7). This is the culmination of creation. But something is missing: then God places man in the most beautiful garden that he might cultivate and look after it (cf. 2:15).

The Holy Spirit, who inspired the whole of the Bible, momentarily evokes the image of man alone — something is missing — without woman. And the Holy Spirit evokes God’s thoughts, even His emotion, as He gazes at Adam, observing him alone in the garden. He is free, he is a lord... but he is alone. And God sees that this “is not good”: as if what is missing is communion, he lacks communion, the fullness is lacking. “It is not good” , God says, and adds: “I will make him a helper fit for him” (2:18).

And so God brings all the animals to man; man gives to each its name — and this is another image of man’s dominion over creation — but he sees that not one of the animals is like himself. Man continues alone. When finally God presents woman, man exultantly recognizes that this creature, and this creature alone, is a part of him: “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). Finally, there is a reflection, a reciprocity. When a person — to give an example to help us understand — wants to shake hands with another, he must have that person before him: if he holds out his hand and no one is there... his hand remains outstretched, there is no reciprocity. This was how man was, he lacked something to reach his fullness; reciprocity was lacking. Woman is not a replica of man; she comes directly from the creative act of God. The image of the “rib” in no way expresses inferiority or subordination, but, on the contrary, that man and woman are of the same substance and are complimentary and that they also have this reciprocity. And the fact that — also in that parable — God moulds woman while man sleeps means precisely that she is in no way man’s creation, but God’s. He also suggests another point: in order to find woman — and we could say to find love in woman — man first must dream of her and then find her. God’s faith in man and in woman, those to whom he entrusted the earth, is generous, direct and full. He trusts them. But then the devil introduces suspicion into their minds, disbelief, distrust, and finally, disobedience to the commandment that protected them. They fall into that delirium of omnipotence that pollutes everything and destroys harmony. We too feel it inside of us, all of us, frequently.

Sin generates distrust and division between man and woman. Their relationship will be undermined by a thousand forms of abuse and subjugation, misleading seduction and humiliating ignorance, even the most dramatic and violent kind. And history bears the scar. Let us think, for example, of those negative excesses of patriarchal cultures. Think of the many forms of male dominance whereby the woman was considered second class. Think of the exploitation and the commercialization of the female body in the current media culture. And let us also think of the recent epidemic of distrust, skepticism, and even hostility that is spreading in our culture — in particular an understandable distrust from women — on the part of a covenant between man and woman that is capable, at the same time, of refining the intimacy of communion and of guarding the dignity of difference.

If we do not find a surge of respect for this covenant, capable of protecting new generations from distrust and indifference, from children coming into the world ever more uprooted from the mother's womb. The social devaluation for the stable and generative alliance between man and woman is certainly a loss for everyone. We must return marriage and the family to the place of honour! The Bible says something beautiful: man finds woman, they meet and man must leave something in order to find her fully. That is why man will leave his father and mother to go to her. It's beautiful! This means setting out on a new path. Man is everything for woman and woman is everything for man.

The responsibility of guarding this covenant between man and woman is ours, although we are sinners and are wounded, confused and humiliated, discouraged and uncertain; it is nevertheless for us believers a demanding and gripping vocation in today's situation. The same narrative of creation and of sin ends by showing us an extremely beautiful icon: "The Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them" (Gen 3:21). It is an image of tenderness towards the sinful couple that leaves our mouths agape: the tenderness God has for man and woman! It's an image of fatherly care for the human couple. God himself cares for and protects his masterpiece.

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MATRIMONY

General Audience
April 29, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

Our reflection on *God's original plan for man and woman as a couple*, after having considered the two narratives from the Book of Genesis, now turns directly to Jesus.

At the beginning of his Gospel, John the Evangelist narrates the episode of the wedding at Cana, at which the Virgin Mary and Jesus were present with his first disciples (cf. Jn 2:1-11). Jesus not only participated at that wedding, but “saved the feast” with the miracle of wine! Thus, the first of His prodigious signs, with which He reveals his glory, He performed in the context of a wedding, and it was an act of great sympathy for that nascent family, entreated by Mary’s motherly care. This reminds us of the Book of Genesis, when God completes his work of creation and makes his masterpiece; the masterpiece is man and woman. And here at a marriage, at a wedding feast, Jesus begins his own miracles with this masterpiece: a man and a woman. Thus Jesus teaches us that the masterpiece of society is the family: a man and a woman who love each other! This is the masterpiece!

Since the time of the wedding at Cana, many things have changed, but that “sign” of Christ contains an ever valid message. Today it seems difficult to speak of marriage as a feast which is renewed in time, in the various seasons of the couple’s lifetime. It is a fact that progressively fewer people are getting married; this is a fact: young people don’t want to get married. In many countries the number of separations is instead increasing while the number of children decreases. The difficulty of staying together — both as a couple and as a family — leads to bonds being broken with ever increasing frequency and swiftness, and the children themselves are the first to suffer the consequences. Let us consider that the first victims, the most important victims, the victims who suffer the most in a separation are the children.

Should you feel from childhood that marriage is a “temporary” bond, unconsciously it will be so for you. In fact, many young people are led to reject the very plan of an irrevocable bond and of a lasting family. I believe

that we must reflect very seriously on why so many young people “don’t feel like” getting married. There is a culture of the provisional ... everything is provisional, it seems there is nothing definitive.

This matter of young people not wanting to marry is one of the emerging concerns of today: why aren’t young people getting married? Why is it that they frequently prefer cohabitation and “limited responsibility”? Why is that many — even among the baptized — have little trust in marriage and in the family? If we want young people to be able to find the right road to follow, it is important to try to understand this. Why do they have no trust in the family?

The difficulties are not only economic, although these are truly serious. Many believe that the changes that have occurred in these last decades were put in motion by the emancipation of women. But even this argument is invalid, it’s false, it isn’t true! It is a form of male chauvinism, which always seeks to dominate women. We give the bad impression that Adam gave, when God asked him: “Why did you eat the fruit of the tree?”, and he said: “The woman gave it to me”. It’s the woman’s fault. The poor woman! We must defend women! In fact, nearly all men and women would want stable emotional security, a solid marriage and a happy family. The family tops all the indices of wellbeing among young people; but, fearing mistakes, many do not want to even consider it; even being Christians, they do not consider the sacrament of matrimony, the single and unrepeatable sign of the covenant, which becomes a testimony of faith. Perhaps this very fear of failure is the greatest obstacle to receiving the Word of Christ, which promises his grace to the conjugal union and to the family.

The most persuasive testimony of the blessing of Christian marriage is the good life of Christian spouses and of the family. There is no better way to speak of the beauty of the sacrament! A marriage consecrated by God safeguards that bond between man and woman that God has blessed from the very creation of the world; and it is the source of peace and goodness for the entire lifetime of the marriage and family. For example, in the first ages of Christianity, this great dignity of the bond between man and woman overcame an abuse then held normal, namely the husbands’ right to repudiate their wives, even for reasons based on pretext or to humiliate. The Gospel of the family, the Gospel which proclaims this very Sacrament overcame this culture of customary repudiation.

The Christian seed at the root of equality between spouses must bear new fruit today. The witness of the social dignity of marriage shall become persuasive precisely in this way, the way of a testimony which attracts, the way of reciprocity between them, of complementarity between them.

For this reason, as Christians, we must become more demanding in this regard. For example: firmly support the right to equal pay for equal work; why is it taken for granted that women should earn less than men? No! They have the same rights. This disparity is an absolute disgrace! At the same time, recognize women's motherhood and men's fatherhood as an always precious treasure, for the good of their children above all. Likewise, the virtue of the hospitality of Christian families today takes on a crucial importance, especially in situations of poverty, degradation, and domestic violence.

Dear brothers and sisters, do not be afraid to invite Jesus to your wedding feast, to invite Him to our home, that He may be with us and safeguard the family. And we mustn't be afraid to also invite his Mother Mary! When Christians marry "in the Lord", they are transformed into an effective sign of God's love. Christians do not marry for themselves alone: they marry in the Lord for the good of the entire community, society as a whole.

I will also speak about this beautiful vocation of Christian matrimony in the next catechesis.

General Audience
May 6, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

In our journey of catecheses on the family, today we touch directly *on the beauty of Christian marriage*. It is not merely a ceremony in a church, with flowers, a dress, photographs.... Christian marriage is a sacrament that takes place *in* the Church, and which also *makes* the Church, by giving rise to a new family community.

It is what the Apostle Paul says in his celebrated expression: "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church"

(Eph 5:32). Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul says that the love between spouses is an image of the love between Christ and his Church. An unimaginable dignity! But in fact it is inscribed in the creative design of God, and with the grace of Christ innumerable Christian couples, with all their limitations and sins, have realized it!

St Paul, speaking of new life in Christ, says that Christians — each one of them — are called to love one another as Christ has loved them, that is to “be subject to one another” (Eph 5:21), which means be at the service of one another. And here he introduces an analogy between husband-wife and Christ-Church. It is clear that this is an imperfect analogy, but we must take it in the spiritual sense which is very lofty and revolutionary, and at the same time simple, available to every man and woman who entrusts him and herself to the grace of God.

Husbands — Paul says — must love their wives “as their own body” (Eph 5:28); to love them as Christ “loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25). You husbands who are present here, do you understand this? Do you love your wives as Christ loves the Church? This is no joke, these are serious things! The effect of this radical devotion asked of man, for the love and dignity of woman, following the example of Christ, must have been tremendous in the Christian community itself. This seed of evangelical novelty, which reestablishes the original reciprocity of devotion and respect, matured throughout history slowly but ultimately it prevailed.

The sacrament of marriage is a great act of faith and love: a witness to the courage to believe in the beauty of the creative act of God and to live that love that is always urging us to go on, beyond ourselves and even beyond our own family. The Christian vocation to love unconditionally and without limit is what, by the grace of Christ, is also at the foundation of the free consent that constitutes marriage.

The Church herself is fully involved in the story of every Christian marriage: she is built on their successes and she suffers in their failures. But we must ask in all seriousness: do we ourselves as believers and as pastors, accept deep down this indissoluble bond of the history of Christ and his Church with the history of marriage and the human family? Are we seriously ready to take up this responsibility, that is, that every marriage goes on the path of the love that Christ has for the Church? This is a great thing!

In the depths of this mystery of creation, acknowledged and restored in its purity, opens a second great horizon that marks the sacrament of marriage. The decision to “wed in the Lord” also entails a missionary dimension, which means having at heart the willingness to be a medium for God’s blessing and for the Lord’s grace *to all*. In deed, Christian spouses participate *as spouses* in the mission of the Church. This takes courage! That is why when I meet newlyweds, I say: “Here are the brave ones!”, because it takes courage to love one another as Christ loves the Church.

The celebration of the sacrament must have this co-responsibility of family life in the Church's great mission of love. And thus the life of the Church is enriched every time by the beauty of this spousal covenant, and deteriorates every time it is disfigured. The Church, in order to offer to all the gifts of faith, hope and love, needs the courageous fidelity of spouses to the grace of their sacrament! The People of God need their daily journey in faith, in love and in hope, with all the joys and the toils that this journey entails in a marriage and a family.

The route is well marked forever, it is the route of love: to love as God loves, forever. Christ does not cease to care for the Church: he loves her always, he guards her always, as himself. Christ does not cease to remove stains and lines of every kind from the human face. Moving and very beautiful to see is this radiation of God's power and tenderness which is transmitted from couple to couple, family to family. St Paul is right: this truly is a “great mystery”! Men and women, brave enough to carry this treasure in the “earthen vessels” of our humanity, are — these men and these women who are so brave — an essential resource for the Church, as well as for the world! May God bless them a thousand times over for this!

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THE THREE EXPRESSIONS

General Audience
May 13, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today's catechesis will serve as a doorway to a series of reflections on family life and what it's really like to live in a family, day in and day out. Imagine three expressions written above the doorway; expressions I've already mentioned here in St Peter's Square several times before. The expressions are: "may I?", "thank you", and "pardon me". Indeed, these expressions open up the way to living well in your family, to living in peace. They are simple expressions, but not so simple to put into practice! They hold much power: the power to keep home life intact even when tested with a thousand problems. But if they are absent, little holes can start to crack open and the whole thing may even collapse.

We usually include these expressions under the general category of being "well-mannered". Okay, a well-mannered person asks permission, says thanks, and asks forgiveness after making a mistake. Very well. But good manners really are that important. A great Bishop, Francis de Sales, used to say that "good manners are already half the way to holiness". But be careful: history has shown that good manners also can become a kind of formalism that masks a dryness of soul and indifference toward the other person. It is often said, "behind a lot of good manners lurk a lot of bad habits". Not even religion is immune from the risk of having formal observance sink into spiritual worldliness. The Devil, tempting Jesus, boasts of good manners. Indeed, he presents himself as a gentleman, a knight in shining armor. He even presents himself as a theologian by quoting Holy Scripture. He appears to have everything right and neat on the outside, but his intent is always to lead others astray from the truth of God's love. We, however, mean "good manners" only in the most authentic way, according to which the habit of cultivating good relations is firmly rooted in a love for the good and a respect for the other person. The family lives according to this refined sense of loving.

Let's look at these expressions: the first expression is, "may I?" When we take care to ask for something kindly — even something we think we have a rightful claim to — we help to strengthen the common life that undergirds

marriage and the family. Entering into the life of another, even when that person already has a part to play in our life, demands the sensitivity of a non-invasive attitude which renews trust and respect. Indeed, the deeper and more intimate love is, the more it calls for respect for the other's freedom and the ability to wait until the other opens the door to his or her heart. At this point, we can remember the words of Jesus in the Book of Revelation: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (3:20). Even the Lord asks permission to enter! Let us not forget that. Before doing anything in your family, ask: "Do you mind if I do this? Would you like me to do this?" This way of asking is well-mannered indeed, but it is also full of love. This does so much good for families.

The second expression is "thank you". Sometimes we have to wonder if we are turning into a civilization of bad manners and bad words, as if this were a sign of self-liberation. It's not uncommon to hear these bad words publicly. Kindness and the ability to say "thank you" are often considered a sign of weakness and raise the suspicion of others. This tendency is encountered even within the nucleus of the family. We must become firmly determined to educate others to be grateful and appreciative: the dignity of the person and social justice must both pass through the portal of the family. If family life neglects this style of living, social life will also reject it. Gratitude, however, stands at the very core of the faith of the believer. A Christian who does not know how to thank has lost the very "language" of God. This is terrible! Let's not forget Jesus' question after he heals the ten lepers and only one of them returns to thank him (Luke 17:18). I remember once listening to a very wise, old person; very simple, but with that uncommon wisdom of life and piety: "Gratitude is a plant that grows only in the soil of noble souls". That nobility of soul, that grace of God in the soul compels us to say "thank you" with gratitude. It is the flower of a noble soul. This really is something beautiful.

The third expression is "pardon me". Granted, it's not always easy to say, but it is so necessary. Whenever it is lacking, the little cracks begin to open up — even when we don't want them to — and they can even become enormous sinkholes. It's hardly insignificant that in the "Our Father" that Jesus teaches us — a prayer that sums up all of life's essential questions — we find this expression: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matt 6:16). To acknowledge that we have fallen short, to be desirous of returning that which has been taken away — respect,

sincerity, love — these make us worthy of pardon. This is how we heal the infection. If we are not able to forgive ourselves, then we are no longer able to forgive period. A house in which the words “I’m sorry” are never uttered begins to lack air, and the flood waters begin to choke those who live inside. So many wounds, so many scrapes and bruises are the result of a lack of these precious words: “I am sorry”. Marital life is so often torn apart by fights ... the “plates will even start flying”, but let me give you a word of advice: never finish the day without making peace with one another. Listen to me carefully: did you fight with your wife or husband? Kids — did you fight with your parents? Did you seriously argue? That’s not a good thing, but it’s not really that which is the problem: the problem arises only if this feeling hangs over into the next day. So if you’ve fought, do not let the day end without making peace with your family. And how am I going to make peace? By getting down on my knees? No! Just by a small gesture, a little something, and harmony within your family will be restored. Just a little caress, no words necessary. But don’t let the sun go down on your family without having made your peace. Do you understand me? It’s not easy, but you have to do it. It will help to make life so much more beautiful.

So these three key expressions for family life are really simple words; so simple that perhaps they even bring a smile to our face. But when we forget them, it’s no laughing matter, right? Perhaps we overlook our good manners too often. May the Lord help us to put them back where they belong: in our hearts, in our homes, and in our civic life. These are the words that truly enter into the love of a family.

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EDUCATION

General Audience
May 20, 2015

Today, dear brothers and sisters, I would like to welcome you because I saw among you many families, Good morning to all the families! Let us continue to reflect on the family. Today we will pause to reflect on an essential characteristic of the family, the natural vocation to *educate children* so they may grow up to be responsible for themselves and for others. What we heard from the Apostle Paul, at the start, is very beautiful: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Col 3:20-21). This is a wise rule: children should be raised to listen to their parents and obey their parents, who, in turn, should not order them around in a negative way, so as not to discourage the children. Children, indeed, must grow without becoming discouraged, step by step. If you parents say to your children: “Let’s climb this ladder” and you take them by the hand and, step by step, help them climb, things will go well. But if you say: “Go up!” — “But I can’t” — “Go!”, this is called provoking your children, asking them to do things they don’t have the ability to do. That is why the relationship between parents and children must be one of wisdom, of a great balance. Children, obey your parents, this pleases God. And you parents, don’t provoke your children by asking of them things they can’t do. And this needs to be done so that children can grow up to be responsible for themselves and for others.

It would seem like an obvious statement, there are difficulties still in our times. It is hard to educate when parents only see their children in the evening, when they come home tired from work. Well, those who are fortunate enough to work! It is even more difficult for parents who are separated, who are weighed down by their condition: the poor dears, they have had real hardships, they have separated and frequently the child is taken hostage and the father speaks ill of the mother, and the mother speaks ill of the father, and so much harm is done. But I say to separated parents: never, never, never take your child hostage! You separated because of many difficulties and reasons, life has given you this trial, but the children should not be the ones to carry the weight of this separation, they should not be used as hostages against the other spouse, they should grow

up hearing their mother speak well of their father, even though they are not together, and the father speak well of their mother. For separated parents this is very important and very difficult, but they can do it.

Above all, the question is: how should we educate? What tradition do we have today to pass on to our children?

Intellectual “critics” of every kind have silenced parents in countless ways, in order to protect the younger generations from the damage — real or presumed — of family education. The family stands accused, among other things, of being authoritarian, of favoritism, of conformism, of the emotional repression that generates conflict.

In fact, a rift has opened up between the family and society, between the family and school, the educational pact today has been broken; and thus, the educational alliance between society and the family is in crisis because mutual trust has been undermined. There are many symptoms. For example, at school relationships between parents and teachers have been compromised. At times there is tension and mutual distrust; and naturally, the consequences fall on the children. On the other hand, the number of so-called “experts” has multiplied, and they have assumed the role of parents in even the most intimate aspects of education. With regard to emotional life, personality and development, rights and duties, these “experts” know everything: objectives, motivations, techniques. And parents must simply listen, learn and adapt. Deprived of their role, they often become overly apprehensive and possessive of their children, to the point of never correcting them: “You cannot correct the child”. They tend to entrust them more and more to the “experts”, even in the most delicate and personal aspects of their lives, putting themselves alone in a corner; and thus parents today run the risk of excluding themselves from the lives of their children. And this is very grave! Today there are cases like this. I am not saying that it always happens, but there are cases. The teacher will admonish the child at school and send a note to the parents. I remember a personal anecdote. Once, when I was in the fourth grade, I said a bad word to the teacher and the teacher, being a good woman, called my mom. She came the next day, they spoke together, and then I was called. And my mother explained to me in front of the teacher that what I had done was bad, that I shouldn’t have done it; but my mother did it with such sweetness and she asked me to apologize to the teacher in front of her. I did it and then I was glad that I did: the story had a happy ending. But that was only the first chapter! When

I got home, the second chapter began... Imagine today if a teacher were to do something of the kind, the next day the parents, or one of the two, would seek to admonish her, because the “experts” say that children should not be reproached like this. Things have changed! That is why parents should not exclude themselves from their children’s education.

It is clear that this approach is not good: it is not harmony, it is not dialogue, and rather than fostering cooperation between the family and other educational agencies, schools, gymnasiums... it counteracts it.

How did we get to this point? There is no doubt that parents or, better yet, certain past educational models had their limitations, there is no doubt. But it is also true that there are mistakes that only parents are allowed to make, because they can compensate for them in a way that is impossible for anyone else. On the other hand, as we well know, life has become stingy with the time for talking, reflecting and facing oneself. Many parents are “sequestered” by work — mom and dad have to work — and by worries, uncomfortable with the new needs of their children and with the complexity of modern life — which is the way it is and we must accept it as it is — and they find themselves as if paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. The problem, however, is not just talking. Superficial “dialogue” does not lead to a true meeting of mind and heart. Let us ask instead: do we seek to understand “where” our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all: do we want to know? Are we convinced that they, in reality, aren’t waiting for something else?

Christian communities are called to offer support to the educational mission of families, and they do this first of all with the light of the Word of God. The Apostle Paul recalls the reciprocity of duties between parents and children: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Col 3:20-21). At the foundation of everything is love, that which God gives us, which “is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but ... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:5-7). Even the best families need support, and it takes a lot of patience to support one another! But such is life. Life is not lived in a laboratory, but in reality. Jesus himself experienced a family upbringing.

Also in this case, the grace of the love of Christ leads to the fulfillment of what is inscribed in human nature. How many astounding examples we have of Christian parents filled with human wisdom! They show that a good family upbringing is the backbone of humanity. Its radiance in society is the source that allows us to fill in the gaps, wounds and voids in parenthood that affect less fortunate children. This radiance can work real miracles. And in the Church these miracles happen every day!

I hope that the Lord bestows on Christian families the faith, freedom and courage necessary for their mission. If family education rediscovers the pride of its leadership, many things will change for the better, for uncertain parents and for disappointed children. It is time for fathers and mothers to return from their exile — for they have exiled themselves from their children's upbringing — and to fully resume their educational role. We hope that the Lord gives this grace to parents: to not exile themselves from the education of their children. And this can only be done with love, tenderness and patience.

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ENGAGEMENT

General Audience
May 27, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!

Continuing these catecheses on the family, today I would like to speak about *engagement*. Engagement — one hears it in the word — has to do with trust, confidence, reliability. Confidence in the vocation that God gives, since marriage is first and foremost the discovery of a call from God. Certainly it is a beautiful thing that young people today can choose to marry on the basis of mutual love. But the very freedom of the bond requires a conscious harmony in the decision, not just a simple understanding of the attraction or feeling, for a moment, for a short time ... it calls for a journey.

Engagement, in other words, is the time when the two are called to perform a real labour of love, an involved and shared work that delves deep. Here they discover one another little by little, i.e. the man “learns” about woman by learning about *this* woman, his fiancée; and the woman “learns” about man by learning about *this* man, her fiancé. Let us not underestimate the importance of this learning: it is a beautiful endeavour, and love itself requires it, for it is not simply a matter of carefree happiness or enchanted emotion. The biblical account speaks of all creation as a beautiful work of God’s love. The Book of Genesis says that: “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Only when it is finished does God “rest”. We understand from this image that God’s love, which brought forth the world, was not an impromptu decision. No! It was a beautiful work. The love of God created the concrete conditions for an irrevocable covenant, one that is strong and lasting.

The covenant of love between man and woman — a covenant for life — *cannot be improvised*. It isn’t made up one day to the next. There is no marriage express: one needs to work on love, one needs to walk. The covenant of love between man and woman is something learned and refined. I venture to say it is a covenant carefully crafted. To make two lives one is almost a miracle of freedom and the heart entrusted to faith. Perhaps we should emphasize this point more, because our “emotional coordinates” have gone a bit askew. Those who claim to want everything right away, then back out of everything — right away — at the first difficulty (or at the first

opportunity). There is no hope for the trust and fidelity entailed in the gift of self, if prevailing tendency is to consume love like some kind of “supplement” for mental and physical well-being. This is not love! Engagement focuses on the will to care for something together that must never be bought or sold, betrayed or abandoned, however tempting the offer may be.

God, too, when he speaks of the covenant with his people, does so several times in terms of betrothal. In the Book of Jeremiah, in speaking to the people who had distanced themselves from him, he reminds the people of when they were the “betrothed” of God, and he says: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride” (cf. 2:2). God took this path of betrothal. He then also made a promise: we heard it at the beginning of the audience, in the Book of Hosea: “I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (2:19-20).

The road the Lord takes with his people on this betrothal journey is a long one. At the end, God espouses his people in Jesus Christ. In Jesus he marries the Church. The People of God is Jesus’ Bride. But what a long road! And you Italians, in your literature you have a masterpiece on betrothal, *The Betrothed*. Young people need to know about it and read it. It is a masterpiece that tells the story of an engaged couple who have endured great suffering, they travel a road filled with many struggles, until at last they arrive at marriage. Don’t leave aside this masterpiece on betrothal, which Italian literature has given especially to you. Go on, read it and you will see the beauty, the suffering, but also the faithfulness of the betrothed.

The Church, in her wisdom, guards the *distinction between being engaged and being spouses*— it’s not the same — especially in view of the delicateness and depth of this test. Let us be careful not to disregard lightheartedly the wisdom of this teaching, which also comes from the experience of happy married life. The powerful symbols of the body hold the keys to the soul: We cannot treat the bonds of the flesh lightly, without opening some lasting wound in the spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:15-20).

Of course, today’s culture and society have become rather indifferent to the delicateness and seriousness of this step. On the other hand, it cannot be

said that they are generous to young people who are determined to make a home and welcome children. Indeed, often they put up a thousand obstacles, both psychological and practical. Engagement is a path of life that has to ripen like fruit; it is a way of maturing in love, until the moment it becomes marriage.

Pre-marriage courses are a special expression of preparation. And we see so many couples, who perhaps come to the course somewhat reluctantly: “But these priests make us take a course! But why? We already know...” and they go reluctantly. But afterwards they are happy and grateful, because they have found there the opportunity — sometimes the only one — to reflect on their experience in non-trivial terms. Yes, many couples are together a long time, perhaps also in intimacy, sometimes living together, but *they don't really know each other*. It seems curious, but experience shows that it's true. Therefore engagement needs to be re-evaluated as a time of getting to know one another and sharing a plan. The path of preparation for marriage should be implemented from this perspective, also with the benefit of the simple but intense witness of Christian spouses. And also by focusing on the essentials: the Bible, by consciously rediscovering it together; prayer, in its liturgical dimension, but also in “domestic prayer” to live out in the home, the Sacraments, the Sacramental life, Confession, ... where the Lord comes to abide in the engaged couple and prepare them truly to receive one another “with the grace of Christ”; and fraternity with the poor and those in need, who lead us to live soberly and to share.

Engaged couples who commit themselves to this path both grow, and all of this leads to preparing for a beautiful celebration of Marriage in a different way, not in a worldly way, but in a Christian way! Let us consider these words of God we have heard, when he speaks to his people as bridegroom to his future bride: “I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (Hos 2:19-20). May every engaged couple think of this and say to one another: “I will take you as my bride, I will take you as my bridegroom”. Wait for that moment. It is a moment, it is a path that goes slowly ahead, but it is a path of maturation. The steps of the journey should not be rushed. This is how we mature, step by step.

The time of betrothal can truly become a time of initiation, into what? Into surprise. Into the surprise of the spiritual gifts with which the Lord,

through the Church, enriches the horizon of the new family that stands ready to live in his blessing.

I invite you now to pray to the Holy Family of Nazareth: Jesus, Joseph and Mary. Pray that the family may make this journey of preparation; and pray for couples who are betrothed. Let us pray to Our Lady all together, a Hail Mary for all engaged couples, that they may understand the beauty of this journey towards Marriage. [*Hail Mary...*]

And to engaged couples who are here in the square: “Enjoy the journey of engagement!”.

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FAMILY AND POVERTY

General Audience
June 3, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

These Wednesdays we have been reflecting on the family and we continue forward with this topic, reflecting on the family. As of today, our catecheses open onto the consideration of the vulnerability of the family, in the living conditions that put it to the test. So many problems are testing families.

One of these trials is poverty. Let us think of the many families that live on the outskirts of major cities, as well as those in rural areas.... So much misery, so much degradation! And then, to make the situation worse, in some places there is also war. War is always a terrible thing. Moreover, it also strikes above all the civil populations, the families. Truly, war is the “mother of all poverty”, war impoverishes the family, a great predator of lives, souls and of the most sacred and beloved bonds.

Despite all this, there are many poor families who try to live their daily lives with dignity, often openly entrusting themselves to God’s blessing. This lesson, however, should not justify our indifference, but rather increase our shame over the fact that there is so much poverty! It is almost a miracle that, even in poverty, the family continues to form, and even preserve — as much as it can — the special humanity of those bonds. This fact irritates those planners of wellbeing who consider attachments, procreation and familial bonds as secondary variables to the quality of life. They don’t understand a thing! On the contrary, we should kneel down before these families, who are a true school of humanity in saving societies from barbarity.

What do we have left if we yield to the extortion of Caesar and Mammon, to violence and to money, and renounce even family ties? A new civil ethic will arrive only when the leaders of public life reorganize the social bond beginning with the perverse struggle that spirals between the family and poverty, which leads us into the abyss.

The prevailing economy is often concentrated on the enjoyment of individual wellbeing, but it largely exploits family ties. This is a serious contradiction! The boundless work of the family is not quoted in financial statements, obviously! Indeed economics and politics are misers in regards to acknowledging this. Yet, the interior formation of the person and the social flow of affections have their mainstay precisely there. Should it be removed, everything would fall apart.

It is not merely a question of bread. We are talking about work, talking about education, talking about health. It is important that this be clearly understood. We are always quite moved when we see images of sick and malnourished children that are shown in so many parts of the world. At the same time, we are also deeply moved by the twinkle in the eyes of many children, deprived of everything and in schools built from nothing, who are proud when showing off their pencil and their notebook. And how lovingly they look at their teacher! Children already know that man does not live on bread alone! And as for family affection; when there is destitution children suffer because they want love, family ties.

We Christians have to be ever closer to the families whom poverty puts to the test. But think, all of you know someone: a father without work, a mother without work ... and this makes the family suffer, the bonds are weakened. This is terrible. Indeed, *social destitution strikes the family and sometimes destroys it*. The lack, loss or strong instability of employment weigh heavily upon family life, imposing a substantial strain on relationships. Living conditions in the poorest neighbourhoods, with housing and transportation problems, as well as reduced social, health and educational services, bring about further difficulties. Adding to these material factors is the damage caused to the family by the pseudo-models spread by the mass media on the basis of consumerism and the cult of appearances, which influence the poorest social classes and increase the breakdown of family ties. Take care of families, attend to the attachment, when destitution puts the family to the test!

The Church is mother, and must not forget this drama of her children. She too must be poor, to become fruitful and respond to so much poverty. A poor Church is a Church that practices voluntary simplicity in her life — in her very institutions, in the lifestyle of her members — to break down every dividing wall, especially to the poor. Prayer and action are needed. Let us pray earnestly that the Lord stir us, to render our Christian families leaders

of this revolution of familial proximity, that is now so essential for us! The Church is made of it, of this familial proximity. Let us not forget that the judgement of the needy, of the small and of the poor prefigures the judgment of God (Mt 25:31-46). Let's not forget this and let's do all we can to help families to go forward in the trial of poverty and destitution which strikes attachments and family bonds. I would like to read once again the Bible text that we heard at the beginning, and each of us think about the families who are tried by destitution and poverty, the Bible reads like this: "My son, deprive not the poor of his living, and do not keep needy eyes waiting. Do not grieve the one who is hungry, nor anger a man in want. Do not add to the troubles of an angry mind, nor delay your gift to a beggar. Do not reject an afflicted suppliant, nor turn your face away from the poor. Do not avert your eye from the needy, nor give a man occasion to curse you" (Sir 4:1-5a). For this is what the Lord will do — so it says in the Gospel — if we do not do these things.

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FAMILY AND ILLNESS

General Audience
June 10, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We continue the catecheses on the family, and in this catechesis I would like to touch upon a condition common to all families, namely, illness. It is an experience of our own fragility, which we experience most of all at home, beginning in childhood, and then especially in the aches and pains of old age. Within the realm of family bonds, the illness of our loved ones is endured with an “excess” of suffering and anguish. It is love that makes us feel this “excess”. So often for a father or a mother, it is more difficult to bear a son or daughter’s pain than one’s own. The family, we can say, has always been the nearest “hospital”. Still today, in so many parts of the world, a hospital is for the privileged few, and is often far away. It is the mother, the father, brothers, sisters and grandparents who guarantee care and help one to heal.

In the Gospels, many pages tell of Jesus’ encounters with the sick and of his commitment to healing them. He presents himself publicly as one who fights against illness and who has come to heal mankind of every evil: evils of the spirit and evils of the body. The Gospel scene just referenced from the Gospel according to Mark is truly moving. It says: “That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons” (1:32). When I think of today’s great cities, I wonder where are the doors to which the sick are brought hoping to be healed! Jesus never held back from their care. He never passed by, never turned his face away. When a father or mother, or even just friends brought a sick person for him to touch and heal, he never let time be an issue; healing came before the law, even one as sacred as resting on the Sabbath (cf. Mk 3:1-6). The doctors of the law reproached Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath, he did good on the Sabbath. But the love of Jesus was in giving health, doing good: this always takes priority!

Jesus sends his disciples to perform the same work and gives them the power to heal, in other words, to draw close to the sick and to heal their deepest wounds (cf. Mt 10:1). We must keep in mind what he says to the disciples in the episode of the man blind from birth (Jn 9:1-5). The disciples

— with the blind man there in front of them! — argue about who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind, causing his blindness. The Lord says clearly: neither him nor his parents; he is so in order that the works of God be made manifest in him. And He heals him. This is the glory of God! This is the Church's task! To help the sick, not to get lost in gossip, always help, comfort, relieve, be close to the sick; this is the task.

The Church invites constant prayer for her own loved ones stricken with suffering. There must never be a lack of prayer for the sick. But rather, we must pray more, both personally and as a community. Let us consider the Gospel episode of the Canaanite woman (cf. Mt 15:21-28). She is a pagan woman. She is not of the People of Israel, but a pagan who implores Jesus to heal her daughter. To test her faith, Jesus at first responds harshly: "I cannot, I must think first of the sheep of Israel". The woman does not give up — when a mother asks for help for her infant, she never gives up; we all know that mothers fight for their children — and she replies: "even dogs are given something when their masters have eaten", as if to say: "At least treat me like a dog!" Thus Jesus says to her: "woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (v. 28).

In the face of illness, even in families, difficulties arise due to human weakness. But in general, times of illness enable family bonds to grow stronger. I think about how important it is to teach children, starting from childhood, about solidarity in times of illness. An education which protects against sensitivity for human illness withers the heart. It allows young people to be "anaesthetized" against the suffering of others, incapable of facing suffering and of living the experience of limitation. How often do we see a man or woman arrive at work with a weary face, with a tired countenance and, when we ask them "What happened?", they answer: "I only slept two hours because we are taking turns at home to be close to our boy, our girl, our sick one, our grandfather, our grandmother". And the day of work goes on. These are heroic deeds, the heroism of families! That hidden heroism carried out with tenderness and courage when someone at home is sick.

The weakness and suffering of our dearest and most cherished loved ones can be, for our children and grandchildren, a school of life — it's important to teach the children, the grandchildren to understand this closeness in illness at home — and they become so when times of illness are accompanied by prayer and the affectionate and thoughtful closeness of

relatives. The Christian community really knows that the family, in the trial of illness, should not be left on its own. We must say 'thank you' to the Lord for those beautiful experiences of ecclesial fraternity that help families get through the difficult moments of pain and suffering. This Christian closeness, from family to family, is a real treasure for the parish; a treasure of wisdom, which helps families in the difficult moments to understand the Kingdom of God better than many discourses! They are God's caresses.

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GRIEF IN THE FAMILY

General Audience
June 17, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the course of our catecheses on the family, today we take direct inspiration from the episode narrated by Luke the Evangelist, which we have just heard (cf. Lk 7:11-15). It is a very moving scene, which shows us Christ's compassion for those who suffer — in this case a widow who has lost her only child — and it also shows us Jesus' power over death.

Death is an experience which touches all families, without exception. It is part of life; yet, where familial love is concerned, death never seems natural. For parents, surviving their own children is particularly heartbreaking; it contradicts the fundamental nature of the very relationships that give meaning to the family. The loss of a son or daughter is like time stopping altogether: it opens a chasm that swallows both past and future. Death, which takes away a little child or young person, is a blow to the promises, to the gifts and the sacrifices of love joyfully brought to the life we gave birth to. Frequently parents come to Mass at Santa Marta with the photo of a son, a daughter, a baby, a boy, a girl, and they say to me: "He's gone, she's gone". And their faces are filled with grief. Death touches us and when it is a child's, it touches us profoundly. The whole family is left paralyzed, speechless. And the child left alone by the loss of one or both parents suffers in a similar way. She asks: "Where is my daddy? Where is my mama?" — Well, she is in heaven" — "Why can't I see her?". This question covers the agony in the heart of a child left alone. The emptiness of abandonment that opens up in him is made all the more agonizing by the fact that he doesn't have the life-experience to even "give a name" to what has happened. "When is daddy coming back?" "When is mama coming?". What do you say when a child suffers? This is what death in the family is like.

In these cases, death is like a black hole that opens up in the life of the family and for which we have no explanation. And at times we even go so far as to lay the blame on God. How many people — I understand them — get angry with God, blaspheme: "Why did you take my son, my daughter? There is no God, God does not exist! Why did he do this?". We hear this so often. But this anger is basically what comes from the heart in great pain;

the loss of a son or of a daughter, of a father or of a mother, is a great sorrow. This happens over and over in families. In these cases, I said, death is like a hole. But physical death has “accomplices” even worse than itself, which are called hate, envy, pride, greed; in short, the sin of the world which works for death and makes it even more painful and unjust. Family bonds seem to be the predestined and helpless victims of these helping powers of death, trailing the history of mankind. Let us think of the absurd “normality” with which, at certain moments and in certain places, events adding to the horror of death are provoked by the hatred and indifference of other human beings. May the Lord keep us free from being accustomed to this!

In the People of God, by the grace of his compassion granted in Jesus, many families prove by their deeds that death does not have the last word: this is a true act of faith. Every time a family in mourning — even terrible mourning — finds the strength to guard the faith and love that unite us to those we love, it has already prevented death from taking everything. The darkness of death should be confronted with a more intense work of love. “My God, lighten my darkness!”, is the invocation of evening prayer. In the light of the Resurrection of the Lord, who abandons none of those whom the Father entrusted to him, we can take the “sting” out of death, as the Apostle Paul says (1 Cor 15:55); we can prevent it from poisoning life, from rendering vain our love, from pushing us into the darkest chasm.

In this faith, we can console one another, knowing that the Lord has conquered death once and for all. Our loved ones are not lost in the darkness of nothing: hope assures us that they are in the good and strong hands of God. Love is stronger than death. Thus, the way is to let love grow, make it stronger, and love will guard us until the day that every tear shall be wiped away, when “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more” (Rev 21:4). If we allow ourselves to be sustained by this faith, the experience of grief can generate even stronger family bonds, a new openness to the pain of other families, a new brotherhood with families that are born and reborn in hope. To be born and reborn in hope, this gives us faith. But I would like to stress the last phrase of the Gospel which he heard today (cf. Lk 7:11-15). After Jesus brought the young man, the only son of a widow, back to life, the Gospel says: “Jesus gave him back to his mother”. And this is our hope! All our loved ones who are gone, the Lord will give them back to us and we will be together with them. This hope does not disappoint! Let us remember well this action of

Jesus: “And Jesus gave him back to his mother”, thus the Lord will do with all our loved ones in the family!

This faith protects us from the nihilist vision of death, as well as from the false consolations of the world, so that the Christian truth “does not risk mixing itself with myths of various types”, surrendering to superstitions beliefs (Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 2 November 2008). Today it is necessary that Pastors and all Christians express in a more concrete way the meaning of the faith in regards to the family experience of grief. We should not deny them the right to weep — we must weep in mourning — “Jesus wept” and was “deeply troubled” by the grave loss of a family that he loved (cf. Jn 11:33-37). We can draw from the simple and strong testimony of the many families who have been able to grasp, in the most arduous transition of death, the safe passage of the Lord, Crucified and Risen, with his irrevocable promise of the resurrection of the dead. God’s work of love is stronger than the work of death. It is of that love, it is precisely of that love, that we must make ourselves hard-working “accomplices”, with our faith! And let us remember Jesus’ deed: “And Jesus gave him back to his mother”, so he will do with all our loved ones and with us when we meet again, when death will be definitively conquered in us. It was conquered by Jesus’ Cross. Jesus will give us all back to the family!

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WOUNDS OF THE FAMILY

General Audience
June 24, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In recent catecheses we have spoken about the family suffering through the frailties of the human condition, poverty, sickness and death. Today, however, we will reflect on the hurts that are incurred in family life. When, that is, we hurt one another within the family. The worst thing!

We know that in every family history there are moments in which the intimacy of loved ones is offended by the behaviour of its members. Words and actions (and omissions!) that, rather than expressing love, dismiss it or even mortify it. When these hurts, which are still rectifiable, are ignored, they deepen: they transform into impertinence, hostility and contempt. And at that point they can become deep wounds that divide husband and wife, and induce them to find understanding, support, consolation elsewhere. But often these “supports” do not consider the good of the family!

The depletion of conjugal love spreads resentment in relationships. And often this disintegration “collapses” onto the children.

There: the children. I would like to meditate a little on this point. Despite our seemingly evolved sensitivity, and all our refined psychological analyses, I ask myself if we are not just anaesthetizing ourselves to the wounds in children’s souls. The more you try to compensate with gifts and snacks, the more you lose your sense of these spiritual wounds — so painful and so deep. We talk a lot about behavioural problems, mental health, the well-being of the child, about the anxiety of parents and their children.... But do we even know what a spiritual wound is? Do we feel the weight of the mountain that crushes the soul of a child in those families where members mistreat and hurt one another to the point of breaking the bonds of marital fidelity. How much weight, do our choices have — mistaken choices, for example — how much weight do they place on the soul of our children? When adults lose their head, when each one thinks only of him- or herself, when a dad and mom hurt one another, the souls of their children suffer terribly, they experience a sense of despair. And these wounds leave a mark that lasts their whole lives.

In the family, everything is connected: when her soul is wounded in some way, the infection spreads to everyone. And when a man and a woman, who have committed to being “one flesh” and forming a family, think obsessively of their own need for freedom and gratification, this bias affects the hearts and lives of their children in a profound way. Frequently these children hide to cry alone.... We need to understand this fully. Husband and wife are one flesh. Their own little children are flesh of their flesh. If we think of the harshness with which Jesus admonishes adults not to scandalize the little ones — we heard the Gospel passage (cf. Mt 18:6) — we can also better understand his words on the serious responsibility to guard the marital bond that gives rise to the human family (cf. Mt 19:6-9). When man and woman have become one flesh, all the father and mother’s wounds and neglect have an impact on the living flesh of their children.

It is true, on the other hand, that there are cases in which separation is inevitable. At times it becomes even morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the weaker spouse or young children from the gravest wounds caused by abuse and violence, by humiliation and exploitation, by disregard and indifference.

There are, thanks be to God, those who, sustained by faith and by love for their children, bear witness to their fidelity to a bond they believed in, although it may seem impossible to revive it. Not all those who are separated feel called to this vocation. Not all discern, in their solitude, the Lord calling them. Around us we find various families in so-called irregular situations — I don’t really like this word — and it causes us to wonder. How do we help them? How do we accompany them? How do we accompany them so that the children aren’t taken hostage by either dad or mom?

Let us ask the Lord for great faith, in order to see reality through the eyes of God; and for great charity in order to approach people with his merciful heart.

General Audience
August 5, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

With this catechesis we return to our reflection on the family. After speaking the last time about families wounded due to misunderstandings

between spouses, today I would like to focus our attention on another reality: how to take care of those who, after an irreversible failure of their matrimonial bond, have entered into a new union.

The Church is fully aware that such a situation is contrary to the Christian Sacrament. However, her gaze as a teacher always draws from a mother's heart; a heart which, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, always seeks the good and the salvation of the people. This is why she feels obliged, "for the sake of truth", to "exercise careful discernment of situations". This is how St John Paul II expressed it in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (n. 84), giving as an example the difference between one subjected to separation compared to one who has caused it. This discernment has to be made.

If we then also look at these new bonds through the eyes of the young sons and daughters — and the little ones watch — through the eyes of the children, we are aware of a greater urgency to foster a true welcome for these families in our communities. For this reason it is important that the style of the community, its language, its attitudes, always be attentive to people, starting with the little ones. They are the ones who suffer the most in these situations. After all, how can we encourage these parents to do everything possible to raise their children in the Christian life, to give them an example of committed and exercised faith, if we keep them at arm's length from the life of the community, as if they are excommunicated? We must act in a way so as not to add even more to the burdens which the children in these situations already feel they have to bear! Unfortunately, the number of these children and youth is really large. It is important for them to feel the Church as loving mother to all, always ready to listen and to meet.

In these decades, in truth, the Church has been neither insensitive nor lazy. Thanks to the in-depth analysis performed by Pastors, led and guided by my Predecessors, the awareness has truly grown that it is necessary to have a fraternal and attentive welcome, in love and in truth, of the baptized who have established a new relationship of cohabitation after the failure of the marital sacrament; in fact, these persons are by no means excommunicated — they are not excommunicated! — and they should absolutely not be treated as such: they are still a part of the Church.

Pope Benedict XVI spoke about this question, calling for careful discernment and wise pastoral accompaniment, knowing that there are no “simple solutions” (*Speech at the Seventh World Meeting of Families*, Milan, 2 June 2012, answer n. 5). Here the repeated call to Pastors to openly and consistently demonstrate the community’s willingness to welcome them and encourage them, so they may increasingly live and develop their membership in Christ and in the Church through prayer, by listening to the Word of God, by attending the liturgy, through the Christian education of their children, through charity and service to the poor, through the commitment to justice and peace.

The biblical icon of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11-18) summarizes the mission that Jesus received from the Father: that of giving his life for the sheep. This attitude is also a model for the Church, which embraces her children as a mother who gives her life for them. “The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open”.... No closed doors! No closed doors! “Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community”.... The Church “is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems” (Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 47).

In the same way all Christians are called to imitate the Good Shepherd. Especially Christian families can cooperate with Him by taking care of wounded families, accompanying them in the life of faith of the community. Each one must do his part in taking on the attitude of the Good Shepherd, who knows each one of his sheep and excludes no one from his infinite love!

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